

# Contemporary Migration in North Carolina

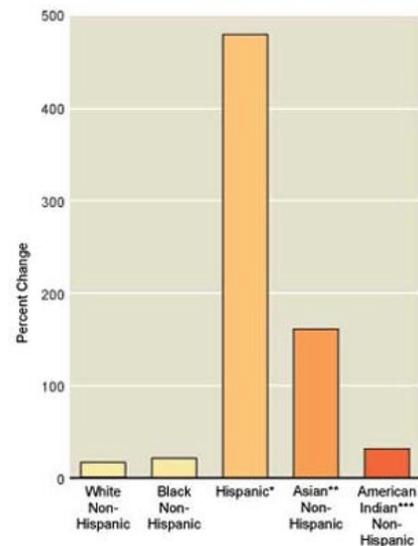
By Alfred W. Stuart and Laura Baum

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Did you know that, until recently, more people emigrated out of North Carolina than immigrated in? In the early 1800s, hundreds of thousands of European Americans left. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, more than 380,000 African Americans emigrated out. This trend of out-migration continued until the last decade. Between 1950 and 1960, 327,838 more people left North Carolina than moved in. Between 1960 and 1970, this drain fell to just over 94,000 people. Between 1980 and 1990, North Carolina actually had a net in-migration of 374,354 people.

What caused this population tilt, or reversal of past trends? The main cause is the creation of new jobs, primarily in factories, offices, and stores in the state's cities. The growth of industries in and around Charlotte, the Piedmont Triad, and the Research Triangle has attracted workers from across the country and even from around the world.

Ethnic Population Growth, 1990-2002



\* Hispanic includes all races.

\*\* Asian includes Pacific Islanders.

\*\*\* American Indian includes Alaskan Natives.

Source: U.S. Census.

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Courtesy of the North Carolina Atlas Revisited.

## Growth through Immigration

Who are these people who are immigrating to North Carolina today? Many are African Americans whose families once left the state and are now returning to find jobs, to retire, or to improve their quality of life. The end of segregation in the South in the 1960s has made more of the new jobs available to African Americans. A lessening of racial tension has also made life in the South more attractive. Meanwhile, racial problems, crime, violence, a decline in jobs, and disappointment with the quality of life in urban areas of the North have led many Black North Carolinians to return home. Many African Americans say that they are returning to be with family members they left behind, to find work, and to find safer schools and communities than they could find in the North.

People of other races are also coming to North Carolina from the North and Midwest to find work. In the past twenty years or so, jobs in those areas have declined, while jobs in North Carolina, especially near its cities, have increased.

Still other people are coming to North Carolina from other countries to find work or to escape persecution in their home countries. The fastest growing segment of these immigrants has been Asian, with their population more than doubling between 1980 and 1990 from 21,168 to 52,166 people.

More than 8,000 Asian people came to North Carolina as refugees from Southeast Asian countries that were affected by the Vietnam War (1964–1975). Many South Vietnamese fled their country as America withdrew from the area in 1975.

Thousands of Cambodians left their country after the Khmer Rouge overthrew their American-backed government.

More than 400 Dega men, who had helped American forces fight the highlands of South Vietnam, came to North Carolina in 1986 and 1994 and now live in Raleigh, Greensboro, and Charlotte,



*Rooster hat of traditional Hmong design, worn during Hmong New Year's celebrations. A Hmong woman living in North Carolina purchased the hat in 1982 while visiting family in Minneapolis, a large Hmong population center, to wear during local New Year festivities. Courtesy of the N.C. Museum of History.*

Lao and Hmong refugees now living in North Carolina helped fight a North Vietnamese-backed Communist movement in Laos. They fled Laos in 1975 when communist forces gained power and began persecuting them. Many resettled elsewhere in the United States before coming to North Carolina to get away from the crime and unemployment they found in larger inner cities.

In the last thirty to forty years, other Asians, including Japanese, Koreans, and Chinese, have come to North Carolina to go to school and to work. Many Japanese and Koreans came when their companies in Japan and Korea opened branches or started factories in the state.

People from other countries such as India and countries in the Middle East have also come to

North Carolina to go to schools here and to find work.

Another group of people who have come to North Carolina are people of Hispanic heritages. In 1990, the number of Hispanics living in the state reached 76,726, a 35.5 percent jump over 1980. Though some Hispanics have come from Cuba and South and Central America, the majority of Hispanics in North Carolina are from Mexico.

The first Hispanics to come to North Carolina in the twentieth century were Cubans. In the 1960s they came to America fleeing the socialist revolution in Cuba that had put Fidel Castro in power.

In the mid-1970s and early 1980s, a recession hit Mexico. Many Mexicans left their country to look for jobs in the United States. Many went to California looking for agricultural work. Soon, there were more immigrants looking for work in California than there were jobs available for them.

At the same time, North Carolina farmers began looking for migrant labor to help them harvest tobacco and crops such as sweet potatoes, cucumbers, and tomatoes. Mexicans in California and throughout the United States heard about the jobs through family and friends who had already migrated to North Carolina. They began moving to the state and to other states on the East Coast where they could find jobs.

In 1985 the federal government passed a law that offered amnesty to agricultural workers who could prove they had worked ninety consecutive workdays in the field. Those who applied for amnesty became legal residents and could apply for permanent citizenship. They could not be deported. The law helped Mexican migrants already working in the United States and may have encouraged others to come as well. This law lasted for only a limited time.

In recent years, professional workers have from Mexico and Central and South America to North Carolina hoping to earn more money in their jobs. Many other Hispanics have come to North Carolina fleeing civil war in their home countries. These people include emigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru. People from Columbia and Venezuela have come fleeing economic and political problems in their countries.

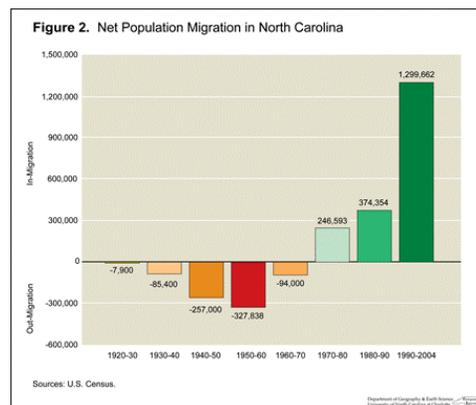
### Change through In-State Migration

Most of the state's population growth has occurred in urban areas. Net in-migration of all people between 1980 and 1990 was led by the larger metropolitan counties, especially Wake (Raleigh), with 94,890 in-migrants, Mecklenburg (Charlotte), with 68,881, and Durham (Durham), with 19,166. The total growth rate of the state's thirteen metropolitan counties was more than double that of the rest of the state.

Though many of the people are immigrating to North Carolina's cities from other states or other countries, many are coming from North Carolina's rural areas. They, too, migrate looking for work. Many of those leaving rural areas are African Americans.

All of these migrations have enriched the culture of North Carolina. Restaurants and grocery stores featuring Mexican, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Indian, Middle Eastern, and other ethnic foods are becoming more popular. Many local businesses now carry items that these new citizens need. Different languages are heard on city streets and college campuses and in bilingual school classes. People from different backgrounds live near each other, go to school together, and work together.

The people immigrating to North Carolina today are only the state's latest arrivals. They are a continuation of the flood of people who first started migrating here hundreds and even thousands of years ago.



Net population migration in N.C., 1920-2004. *Courtesy of the North Carolina Atlas Revisited.*

*At the time of the article's publication, Laura Baum was an editor with the North Carolina Museum of History. She is a graduate of Duke University in Durham and was pursuing a master's degree in English literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Alfred W. Stuart was a professor of geography at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.*